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On Means and Ends: The Role of Goal Focus in Successful Goal Pursuit

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Abstract

When pursuing a goal, one can focus more on the process or on the outcome of goal pursuit. We take a closer look at the hypothesis that, when pursuing goals that are demanding in terms of the level of skill or self-regulation required to achieve them, focusing on the process is more adaptive and focusing on the outcome can even be detrimental to goal achievement. We summarize the evidence reported in the emerging literature on the adaptiveness of process and outcome focus for goal pursuit and attainment.

Key words: goals, motivation, goal focus, means, outcome

On Means and Ends: The Role of Goal Focus in Successful Goal Pursuit

Goals are cognitive representations of desired (or dreaded) states that are to be approached (or avoided) through action. In other words, goals are cognitive representations linking means and ends (e.g., Kruglanski, 1996). As Little (1989) pointed out, people want to know what they should be doing and, in particular, *how* and *why* they should be doing it. Both the “how” and the “why” seem important for organizing and guiding behavior over time and across situations and for providing meaning. Moreover, goal pursuit enhances performance, the acquisition of resources, and subjective well-being (Emmons, 1996; Freund & Riediger, 2006). However, research on various goal dimensions has shown that, “all goals are not created equal” (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). In this paper, we propose that focusing primarily on the “how” of goal pursuit (process focus) could be more beneficial for goal pursuit and attainment than focusing on the “why” (outcome focus) and review the literature regarding the adaptiveness of process and outcome focus for goal pursuit and achievement (for an overview, see Freund, Hennecke, & Mustafić, 2012).

THE CONCEPT OF GOAL FOCUS

Imagine two people on a low-calorie diet in order to lose weight. One of them is focusing on the outcome, namely how attractive she will be with a few less pounds, the other on the process, namely what foods to avoid and what low-calorie recipes to cook. We define *process focus* as the degree to which a person attends to aspects of the goal that are related to the means and *outcome focus* as the degree to which a person attends to the desired outcomes and consequences of goal pursuit. Note, that outcomes can constitute the means for attaining other superordinate outcomes, and means can constitute

the outcomes of subordinate means (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998). However, within a given means-end relationship a definition of what constitutes the means and what constitutes the outcome allows us to distinguish clearly between process and outcome focus. Table 1 lists the main differences between the two foci.

Table 1. *Main differences between a process and an outcome (adapted from Freund, Hennecke, & Mustafić, 2012)*

Process focus	Outcome focus
Means/actions	End state/consequences
Proximal/concrete	Distal/abstract
Contextualized	Decontextualized
Provides no standard of comparison between actual and desired state	Provides clear standard of comparison between actual and desired state
Guides goal-related actions	Provides direction, meaning

The differences listed in Table 1 are relative to each other. Typically, the means are more proximal and concrete than their more distal and abstract outcomes (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). While the process of goal pursuit takes place in specific situational contexts, outcomes tend to be more decontextualized. A dieter, for example, must diet in specific contexts (e.g., at a restaurant, during breakfast) while the desired weight loss of five pounds is not necessarily context-bound.

The appropriateness of the means is measured according to the standard laid down by the outcome—a diet is only successful if it results in the desired weight loss. A dieter's

mirror image, for example, reveals discrepancies between the desired and the current state. According to Carver and Scheier's cybernetic control model (e.g., 1990), this discrepancy motivates behavior. While outcomes provide standards for goal achievement, they do not offer guidelines for goal-relevant actions, which are located on the level of means (Emmons, 1996): A dieter who fantasizes about her ideal figure will not automatically lose weight (Oettingen & Wadden, 1991), whereas a dieter who pays attention to eating proper dietary foods will lose weight without closely monitoring her figure.

Oettingen's research is concerned with the motivating force of contrasting the desired with the actual state, resulting in a *negative* discrepancy. Our own research suggests that even successful goal pursuit should not only be cognitively represented on the outcome level, but instead be traced back to the proper means in order to be continued (Hennecke & Freund, 2014). In line with findings about "slacking," which occurs when people feel "licensed" to pursue a goal less rigorously after achieving success (e.g., de Witt Huberts, Evers, & de Ridder, 2011), we found that more weight loss in one week predicted less weight loss (or even weight gain) in the subsequent week. This pattern was attenuated when successful dieters believed that they were "doing well" on the process level (versus the outcome level). These successful dieters probably knew which strategies to stick to and even felt more self-efficacious over the course of the diet.

While focusing on the means provides guidelines for actions, the more abstract representation of outcomes gives these actions direction and meaning (Little, 1989). According to construal level theory, the cognitive construal of an event or goal in a more abstract as compared to a more concrete manner makes its consequences and meaning

more salient (Trope & Liberman, 2003). This, in turn, can help ward off temptations of more proximal outcomes (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). However, while thinking of the potential consequences of one's actions is associated with a higher value of the goal (Fujita & Sastosa, 2009) and stronger goal commitment (Heckhausen, 1989), once a commitment has been made, the goal-relevant actions/means become imbued with the meaning and properties of their desired outcomes: By association with the desired outcome, the means are experienced with the same valence as the anticipated outcomes (Fishbach, Shah, & Kruglanski, 2004).

THE ADAPTIVENESS OF GOAL FOCUS

Mind-sets differ significantly between the phases of goal setting and goal pursuit (Heckhausen, 1989). During the pre-decisional phase of goal setting, people compare the advantages and disadvantages of one or more outcomes (Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Steller, 1990). To come to a good decision, people also have to take into account if they have or can acquire the means that are needed to achieve these outcomes, but first and foremost they need to weigh the value of different potential outcomes in light of their higher-order goals and values in order to make a good decision. During the phase of goal setting, then, an outcome focus should be more likely and more adaptive for making a good decision (see Freund et al., 2012).

Once a person has committed to pursuing a certain goal, maintaining a cognitive representation of both means and outcomes to a certain degree is likely needed for successful goal pursuit. Pham and Taylor (1999) found that mentally simulating both the process and the outcome while preparing for an examination resulted in higher grades than mentally simulating either one alone. However, process simulations alone resulted

in better academic performance than outcome simulations alone, presumably because they help to “unpack” the steps necessary for goal pursuit, thereby helping to plan goal pursuit (Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). Another reason for the superiority of a process over an outcome focus might have been that students are more likely to persist in a given activity (e.g., studying) for longer periods of time if they experience the activity as rewarding. The reward might lie in the intrinsic value of the means (e.g., interest in the subject matter) or in their instrumentality for achieving the desired outcome. People’s motivation to pursue a given goal, the amount of effort they invest in goal pursuit, and their performance have all been found to increase when they perceive the means as particularly instrumental (Bandura, 1997; Labroo & Kim, 2009). In turn, people associate their investment of effort in the process of goal pursuit with the value and instrumentality of the means (Labroo & Kim, 2009).

Another reason why a stronger process focus might contribute to self-regulation is people’s reliance on the *effort heuristic*, according to which the more effort they perceive themselves investing in goal pursuit, the higher they perceive the value of the outcome to be (Kruger, Wirtz, Van Boven, & Attermatt, 2004). In turn, the more valuable a goal, the more likely it is that it will be pursued persistently (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Given that *process focus* is defined as the degree to which a person attends to the means of goal pursuit, the effort put into goal pursuit should be more salient when adopting a process compared to an outcome focus. Thus, a process focus should intensify the effects of the effort heuristic. Similarly, the higher salience of means when adopting a process focus should also intensify escalation of commitment after setbacks. Escalation of commitment describes that, the higher previous investments into a goal were, the more likely future

investments will be (Staw, 1976). Hence, when encountering difficulties or set-backs, focusing on the means invested into goal pursuit should also increase further investment of means. As persistence in goal pursuit in the face of difficulty is typically seen as one of the hallmarks of self-regulation, focusing on the means should thus contribute to self-regulation.

In sum, then, focusing on the process of goal pursuit should make the effort one has invested as well as the value and instrumentality of the means salient and thereby contribute to greater persistence and better performance. At first glance, this appears to contradict Fishbach and Choi's (2012) conclusion that focusing on the instrumentality of the means instead of the experiential aspects of goal pursuit strengthens one's intention to pursue a goal, but not one's persistence in goal pursuit. However, Fishbach and Choi argued that overjustification might undermine the experiential enjoyment of goal pursuit and thereby also persistence. We posit that the very value of the means might increase due to its instrumentality with respect to outcome achievement. This is not the same as focusing on the outcome during goal pursuit (i.e., *why* one is engaging in the activity). In fact, this focus on the outcome is exactly the focus that Fishbach and Choi induced in their experiments when they asked participants to focus on why they were engaging in a particular activity (e.g., yoga), which resulted in a lower level of persistence than was observed when they asked participants to focus on the experiential aspects and their enjoyment of the activity.

Another contradiction seems to exist between our work on goal focus and the research by Fujita and colleagues (e.g., Fujita et al., 2006) that suggests that higher-level construals are more adaptive than lower-level construals as they are associated with less

delay-discounting (i.e., valuing immediate rewards more than distant ones) and stronger intentions to perform an unpleasant task than lower-level construals. Note that construal levels denote general mind-sets of representing events or goals in more concrete/immediate or abstract/delayed terms and do not refer to means-ends relations (Fujita et al., 2006). For instance, a low-level construal of a candy bar likely directs attention to the immediate hedonic value of its consumption, while a high-level construal might be associated with the delayed health-related consequences (Fujita & Sastosa, 2011). In contrast, goal focus concerns the salience of means and ends within a given goal. When the goal is to increase the hedonic enjoyment of food, then the candy bar would likely be judged a good means to this end. In contrast, it would not be considered a means for the health goal. For the health goal, it is more likely that an apple is represented as a good means and is chosen over a candy bar. In line with this assumption, we found that in contrast to an outcome focus, a process focus decreased the likelihood of deviating from the goal of dieting (Freund & Hennecke, 2012).

There is also evidence that focusing on the process is adaptive when goal pursuit demands a high level of skill or self-regulation. Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1997, 1999) found that when participants were learning a new task, a process focus helped them to acquire the necessary goal-relevant means, whereas an outcome focus distracted them from practicing and acquiring the goal-relevant means and thereby hindered successful goal pursuit. Similarly, Vallacher, Wegner, and Samoza (1989) observed that focusing on the process was beneficial for difficult tasks, but focusing on the outcome resulted in better performance in easy tasks. Likewise, focusing on the process may be more beneficial when the goal is demanding with respect to self-regulation. For example, in

the context of the goal to start exercising regularly, Freund, Hennecke, and Riediger (2010) found that a process focus was positively related to goal satisfaction, affective well-being, and greater persistence over a period of three months. In another study, focusing on the process was positively and focusing on the outcome was negatively associated with weight loss (Freund & Hennecke, 2012). This may have been due to the greater salience of dietary behavior that is implied when one adopts a process focus. In contrast, focusing on the outcome was related to disinhibited eating after dietary lapses (e.g., eating an entire chocolate bar after having eaten one piece) rather than compensating for the lapses (e.g., by having a smaller lunch).

Another instance of goal pursuit that is demanding in terms of self-regulation is the preparation for an exam. One indicator of the self-regulatory difficulty related to this goal is the frequency of procrastination (Schouwenburg & Groenwoud, 2001). Focusing on the means of goal pursuit might be a helpful safeguard against procrastination in academic contexts as it directs attention to the specific actions required for good preparation rather than to the—temporally more distant—exam itself that might cause fear of failure (Krause & Freund, 2014). Finally, the literature on implementation intentions suggests that goals that are tied to specific contexts are more likely to be pursued (e.g., Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997). Having concrete, context-specific processes (see Table 1) in mind when thinking of one's goal might help people to recognize opportunities for goal pursuit and implement what they consider the proper means when these opportunities occur.

OUTLOOK

While our own research has shown that an outcome focus during goal pursuit does not foster or is even detrimental to self-regulation, others have found that activating outcome-related thoughts can support the pursuit of personal goals. For example, Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski (2003) and Shah and Kruglanski (2003) found that increasing the cognitive accessibility of desired goal states has a positive effect on persistence and performance during goal pursuit. The seeming contradiction between these results and ours as well as Fishbach and Choi's (2012) is indicative of possible moderators of the relationship between goal focus and successful goal pursuit.

One such moderator could be the degree to which one enjoys engaging in the goal-relevant means. Focusing on the desired outcome of enjoyable activities may reduce their intrinsic appeal just as extrinsic rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation (e.g., Ryan et al., 1996). Similarly, perceiving an activity as being primarily "in the service" of achieving a given outcome may undermine its intrinsic value. If, however, goal pursuit is experienced as aversive, focusing on the outcome might help one to endure the unpleasant here and now of goal pursuit (Krause & Freund, 2014) by making the activity feel more meaningful (Fujita et al., 2006; van Tilburg & Igou, 2012). However, even aversive activities may benefit from a process focus if they are challenging (e.g., dieting, studying for an exam) and require planning or the mastery of complex means of goal pursuit (Zimmermann & Kitsantas, 1997, 1999). Future research should consider this interplay between the—more or less enjoyable—experience of engagement in goal-relevant means and task difficulty.

The aversiveness of goal pursuit might also interact with the phase of goal pursuit. When one needs to initiate an unpleasant means of goal pursuit (e.g., starting to exercise),

focusing on desired outcomes may increase motivation to initiate goal-relevant action (Fishbach & Choi, 2012; Krause & Freund, 2014). In contrast, persistence in a goal-relevant activity over an extended period of time may be more likely when one focuses on the means and particularly on the means one considers pleasant (Fishbach & Choi, 2012; Freund et al., 2012). In sum, we believe that the concept of goal focus is a useful addition to the psychological literature on the determinants of successful goal pursuit that awaits future research in educational, occupational, health and other applied contexts.

Acknowledgments and Endnotes

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Recommended Readings

- A more comprehensive review of the concept of goal focus including its development across adulthood is provided by: Freund, A. M., Hennecke, M., & Mustafić, M. (2012). On gains and losses, means and ends: Goal orientation and goal focus across adulthood. In R. M. Ryan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of human motivation* (pp. 280-300). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. This chapter also discusses the role of the motivational phase in goal focus in more detail than the present paper does.
- A representative study that illustrates original research on goal focus is: Freund, A. M., & Hennecke, M. (2012). Changing eating behaviour vs. losing weight: The role of goal focus for weight loss in overweight women. *Psychology and Health*, 27, 25-42. doi:10.1080/08870446.2011.570867